DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 249 PS 026 713

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TITLE Ready To Learn: Exploring the Concept of School Readiness and Its Implications.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Australia and New Zealand Conference on the First Years of School (7th, Canberra, Australia, 1998). Similar in content to PS 026 712, another conference paper by the same authors.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Learning Readiness; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Role; *School Readiness; Student Adjustment; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Sydney)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there have been calls in many countries to ensure that children come to school "ready to learn." This study explored what is meant by this term by different groups of people and the ways in which the beliefs underpinning such a term influence decisions such as when children start school, the classes they enter, and whether or not they progress annually. In this investigation, groups of parents, school teachers, and children associated with two schools in suburban Sydney, Australia participated in focus groups asking them to identify elements of school readiness, the ways in which they could be identified, and who bears responsibility for preparing children for school. Results showed that parents and teachers were clear in their belief that the major responsibility for getting children ready for school rests with parents and guardians; respondents felt teachers bear some responsibility for children's school readiness, however, especially related to the transition to school. Teachers and children emphasized the importance of talking with children and describing what school would be like. While parents also regarded this as important, many indicated that they also thought it important for children to have some knowledge and skills related to learning and school before they start. While children seemed clear on the distinctions between preschool and school, adults seemed to understand this least of all. Teachers in preschool and school settings seemed unaware of the skills and expertise of their colleagues in different settings, and while there was an acceptance of the importance of talking and working together, this seemed to happen only rarely. (Contains 29 references.) (EV)

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ED 421 249

THE SEVENTH AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND CONFERENCE ON THE FIRST YEARS OF SCHOOL

CANBERRA, 1998

Ready to learn: Exploring the concept of school readiness and its implications[1]

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Abstract

In recent years there have been calls, both within Australia and abroad, to ensure that children come to school "ready to learn". This paper explores what different groups of people mean by this term. Issues related to the different criteria used to determine a child's readiness for school and how and why these might be applied, are discussed, as are levels of responsibility for preparing children for school. This discussion draws on research investigating the views of teachers, parents and children and considers the implications of these different views.

Introduction

This paper reports on a pilot project designed to investigate the perceptions, interpretations and notions of the term 'school readiness' held by the groups of people most involved in the transition of children from settings prior to schooling to that schooling. The research questions considered in this pilot project were the following.

1. What do different groups of people - children, parents/guardians, teachers in school and prior to school settings and other early childhood workers - understand by the term 'school readiness'?
2. What criteria are used by these different groups of people to determine when children are 'ready for school'?
3. Whose responsibility does each of these different groups of people feel it is to get children 'ready for school'?
4. What does each of these different groups of people feel should happen to get children 'ready for school'?
5. What does each of these different groups of people regard as the elements of successful transitions to school?
6. What criteria are used by each of these different groups of people to measure the success of transitions to school?
7. What does each of these different groups of people expect to happen when children start school?
8. What expectations does each of these different groups have of the other groups when children start school?

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[1] The support for the continuation of this project through the UWS Macarthur Complementary Research Units Program and a UWS Macarthur Foundation Grant is gratefully acknowledged.

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The initial results pertaining to the first two of these questions have been presented elsewhere (Dockett, Perry & Tracey, 1997). These will be reiterated in this paper which will, however, concentrate on the results arising from the pilot study in relation to Questions 3 - 6.

Background

Readiness for school or readiness to learn?

As part of the national focus on education in the United States of America, in 1990 President Bush stated, as the first national goal for education, that "by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Boyer, 1991, p.5). Similar terms have been used in the Australian context (Carrick, 1989; Rice, 1997). While this statement embodies a commendable focus on early childhood education and the importance of education in the early years, it also epitomises some of the differences in perceptions about early learning and about starting school.

Specifically, statements about children being "ready to learn" are often equated with statements about "school readiness", yet the two can be quite different, though related, concepts. Kagan (1993) suggests that readiness to learn can occur at any time as an individual reflects an appropriate developmental basis for learning specific material. For example, a toddler who has sufficient developmental maturity to manipulate his/her mouth, tongue and vocal chords would be considered ready to learn certain oral language skills; an adult who possesses skills related to balance and kinaesthetic awareness might be considered ready to learn to ski. School readiness, on the other hand, relates more to specific skills or understandings that may be required in order to enter school and to succeed at school. In Kagan's (1993) words, *"readiness for learning is a gate-opener; readiness for school is a gatekeeper"* (p. 67).

Part of the confusion about what it means to be "ready for school" can be traced to the confounding use of the terms school readiness and readiness to learn. Adults in contact with very young children tend to argue that children are ever ready to learn, and in fact, have been learning at least from the time of birth, if not before.

Differences in definitions

Many people use the term "school readiness". Not surprisingly, it means different things to different people. Kagan (1993) has suggested that there is a commonsense understanding of readiness, common among parents and politicians, yet at variance with the views of professional educators. Even among educators, there seem to be several definitions of school readiness (Griffin & Harvey, 1995; Kagan, 1992; May & Kundert, 1997; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). For example, Lewit & Baker (1995) refer to school readiness as readiness for learning to a standard of physical, intellectual and social development that enables children to fulfil school requirements and to assimilate a school's curriculum. However, there is little agreement about the nature of that standard. Some researchers have related school readiness to academic and motor skills (Blackman 1988; Davidowitz 1988), while others have operationalised the term as a multidimensional concept which incorporates the child's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development (Immroth & Ash-Geisler, 1994; Peters & McLeod, 1997; Quay, Kaufman-McMurrain, Minore & Steele, 1997). Differences in definition, in turn, lead to debates about whether or not school readiness can be assessed and, if so, how this may be

achieved. The difficulties inherent in this situation are summarised by Kagan (1993) when she notes that *"you can't measure what you can't define"* (p. 70).

Parents and teachers do not necessarily share the same beliefs about school readiness. Lewit and Baker (1995) report that the majority of teachers in their study (75%) listed being physically healthy, rested and well nourished as an essential feature of school readiness, whereas parents focussed on academic skills. Parents and teachers agreed that communication skills, enthusiasm and social skills were important. In another study of teachers from school and prior to school settings, Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz & Rosenkoetter (1989) reported that the major determinants of school readiness for both groups were social interaction, communication, instruction following, conduct and self-care. Davies & North (1990) indicated that the most frequently mentioned determinants of school readiness for their sample of Kindergarten teachers were self-help, social, communication and cognitive skills, in that order.

It seems clear that, while the term "school readiness" is used by all the adult stakeholders in the transition of children into schooling, there is no agreed meaning for the term. One of the aims of the pilot project reported in this paper was to investigate the different perceptions of adults. A further, major aim was to identify the perceptions of the children directly involved in the move to compulsory schooling. To date, children's views and perceptions have been noticeably lacking from the literature.

School entry age

In Australia, the school readiness debate is related to ongoing discussions concerning a uniform school entry age (Biggs & Potter, 1995; Schools Council, 1992; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). The reasons underlying a consistent age of school entry across the country relate to issues of access and mobility, as indicated in statements from the Schools Council and the Senate Inquiry of 1996:

> *"For the sake of those families who move interstate while children are at school, there seem to be good arguments for introducing uniformity between States in the ages children start school, ..."*
>
> (Schools Council, 1992, p. 16)
>
> *"The Committee recommends that the governments of the Commonwealth, States and Territories devise consistent nomenclature and descriptors for the years of early childhood and of compulsory schooling. This will entail: ... a common starting age for, and a common date of eligibility for entry to, compulsory schooling, and similarly for the year before compulsory schooling ..."*
>
> (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996, p. 40)

While these are important issues, there is little mention of how these relate to children's readiness for school, or for learning. To date, there seems to be no clear relationship between school starting age and readiness to learn in a school setting (Morrison, Griffith & Alberts, 1997; Richardson, 1997). Rather, the debate highlights the individuality of children at any age and the need to consider the type of school, program and teaching style which greets children on their entry to school.

Starting school

There is no doubt that starting school is a critical period in the life of a child. The social context is usually quite different from any that has been experienced before, and one that has a range of different demands and expectations to be assessed and acted upon. Children, and families, are involved in a setting where parents have little input into curriculum and where the performance of individual children is assessed in a comparative framework (Entwisle, 1995). Children are expected to adjust to the demands of the classroom and the school as well as to the individual teacher. Children experience a change in educational goals, classroom management and in individual interactions with a specific adult (Hadley, Wilcox & Rice, 1994). Academically as well as socially, children meet challenges as they are expected to comprehend and perform complex tasks. Furthermore, the ways in which children respond to academic challenges and the changed social expectations of the classroom have direct bearing on how they regard themselves as well as how they are regarded by others. Children's images of themselves, particularly as learners, are influenced directly by what happens in the early years of school. Teachers' images of children also are shaped in this time and these are often used as the basis for grouping or stratifying children (Entwisle, 1995).

Characteristics of this study

In this context, this study seeks to explore the expectations of different groups of adults about readiness for school. In addition, it aims to incorporate the perspectives of the children involved in the transition to school and to consider what is of importance and relevance for them. While most other studies investigating school readiness have utilised researcher constructed checklists in which categories are predetermined by the researchers and responses are limited to closed ratings (Immroth & Ash-Geisler, 1994; Quay, Kaufman-McMurrain, Minore & Steele, 1997), this investigation is based on a grounded theory approach which uses interviews to establish issues relevant to the discussion. Hence, in two major ways - the use of open-ended responses and related grounded theory approaches and the involvement of children - this study represents a departure from past studies.

Pilot study

The researchers have developed a very strong collaborative relationship with two schools in the south western suburbs of Sydney. Through these schools, arrangements were made to conduct focus group interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) with groups of parents/guardians, school teachers, including school executive, school children and children who had not yet commenced school. As well, a focus group interview was held with a small number of teachers working in prior to school settings. The numbers in the sample are shown in Table 1.

Group	Number	
	Male	Female
School children	13	10
Children not yet at school	2	1
Parents / Guardians	3	11
Teachers in prior to school settings	1	4
School teachers, including executive	0	14

Table 1 Sample for pilot project interviews

Each of the interviews was conducted by one of the researchers with another taking notes. Adult groups consisted of between three and five people, and child groups consisted of two or three children. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes for each adult group and between 10 and 15 minutes for the children. The initial questions in each interview were based on the research questions but subsequent discussion and questionning was largely respondent driven.

Results

Data from the focus group interviews pertaining to understandings of the term school readiness and the criteria used to determine this have been reported earlier (Dockett, et al, 1997). In summary, five main categories of comment were identified from among the participants. These have been labelled: knowledge, adjustment, skill, disposition and rules, and defined as follows:

> *"Responses were coded as **knowledge** if they made reference to ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school. ...*
> *Responses were coded as **adjustment** if they encompassed notions of social adjustment to the school context. ...*
> *Responses were coded as **skill** oriented if they referred to small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour (Katz & Chard, 1989). ...*
> *Responses were allocated to the category of **disposition** if they incorporated comments about children's attitudes to school or learning. ...*
> *Responses were coded as **rules** when they related to fitting in with the school and school expectations."*
>
> (Dockett, et al, 1997, pp. 5-6)

Parents and both groups of teachers emphasised the categories of adjustment and disposition in their comments. To a lesser extent, skills and knowledge were mentioned by all of these groups, with teachers much less concerned about the knowledge the children brought with them to school. On the other hand, children were overwhelmingly concerned with the category of rules. It could be that this category is really no more than the children's approach to adjustment. That is, the way children see themselves adjusting to the school is by knowing and obeying the rules. However, if this is the case, there is certainly a great deal of difference in the way in which this is expressed by the different groups. One thing that is clear from all the groups interviewed is that being ready for school is not seen as the same thing as having certain knowledge which makes you ready to learn. This reinforces the distinction made in Kagan's (1993) analysis.

Responsibility for readiness

All of the adult stakeholders were clear that the major responsibility for getting children ready for school rested with the parents/guardians of the children. One parent suggested that "you can't rely on other people, you have to do it yourself" while a school teacher was adamant: "Parents. Who else has the contact? Parents, definitely the parents." Another teacher suggested that "even if they (children) go to preschool, parents have to get them ready for school" and members of the school executive felt that getting the children ready for school was definitely part of the parents' role.

However, the respondents from all groups felt that there were responsibilities for teachers in both prior to school and school settings in getting children ready for school. Parents suggested: " ... (preschool) can teach the child to read and write" and "the school provides orientation which gives the child an idea of what school will be like". Similarly, school teachers could see a role for both prior to school and school settings: " ... school has some responsibility via orientation ... the preschool (if they are enrolled) also has some responsibility ..." and "it is the school's responsibility to allow them to visit the school and become familiar with it – make the kids and parents aware of what goes on in the school".

Teachers in prior to school settings who were interviewed felt that while the major responsibility rested with parents, there was a lot that they and school teachers could do to make the transition to school more successful for many children. Of particular importance to some of these teachers was the fact that there are services available to children, particularly those with special needs, in the prior to school settings, which are not so available in school settings. The continuation of such services may be a positive contribution to a successful transition.

What should be done to help children get ready for school?

There were plenty of suggestions from all groups of stakeholders as to what needed to be done by parents/guardians in order for a child to be ready for school. As discussed previously, parents/guardians emphasised adjustment and disposition. Statements about what was important included: "build up respect for teachers"; "telling him 'you're a big boy'"; "I just told him that he'd be with a group of kids and emphasised that it would be fun". In addition, parents were concerned about skills and knowledge, commenting that they aimed to "teach them to recognise the alphabet, tie their own shoe laces, read to them, teach them toilet hygiene".

Teachers, on the other hand felt that parents/guardians should spend a great deal of their time enriching the children's experiences through family outings, doing lots of stimulating things together in groups, reading to and with them and, generally, building on their verbal language skills through talking. Several teachers mentioned the importance of parents bringing the children to the school and showing them around. One teacher described the experience of some children who felt that they had been deserted because "they hadn't been told they were coming to school. It wasn't talked about. They just came up... they can't be ready for something they don't know about. They had no experience or preparation for school, ... thought they were abandoned [and the parents] didn't explain they were coming back". Another teacher commented that "a lot [of parents] think if you teach them ABC and how to count, they are ready, [they may be prepared] but they can't cope with a whole day".

A counterside to this was raised by a group of parents, who described the difficulties they had in accessing the school. Some issues related to feeling uncomfortable about approaching teachers while others related to hours of work and not being able to get to the school during working hours. One parent noted particularly the difficulties related to other, younger children "when parents have a little toddler, they feel that they can't come into the classroom. This makes the school child feel isolated and like Mum is going away with the baby and leaving him or her".

In terms of what could be done to help children start school, some children suggested that parents should "go with them for the first couple of days to get used to it" and that they

should "tell them what it's going to be like". For many children, getting ready for school was about the day-to-day events that preceded entering the school grounds. One child said that she "got dressed and tied her shoelaces" and another commented that it was important to "brush [your] hair and teeth". However, one other child stated that he had to be able to do "colouring, cutting and pasting" before he could come to school. When asked what he would tell his younger sister about what she needed to do to get ready for school, one Kindergarten child said that he would tell her "where the office and the toilet was ... and if you run, you trip over". Another child offered the advice that children starting school "have to learn to write, learnt to write and think, learn to write the letters out in your brain, thinking and writing go together in your brain. Then they can go to school".

Transitions

Both school and prior to school teachers recognised that there were a number of things which they could be doing which might assist in the transition of children to school. One of these was the development of better communication, both at a systemic level and at a local level. At one school where the pilot study was conducted, more than 50% of each Kindergarten intake comes from the one preschool. A strong relationship has been developed between the two settings with school teachers observing children in the preschool, preschool teachers accompanying their children to the school on a number of occasions and records being transferred from the preschool to the school. At the other school, where the Kindergarten intake was not so concentrated, these activities, while being seen as beneficial, were not undertaken.

Teachers in prior to school settings felt that there was insufficient flexibility in schools to allow the schools to meet many of the needs of neophyte children, although some suggested that this was gradually changing. Examples of changes included schools staggering their new enrolments over three days, having a separate playground area for Kindergarten children so that they gradually blend in with older students, allowing Kindergarten children to avoid school assemblies for the first few weeks and even "carry[ing] on some things from preschool". However, it is clear that the onus is on the children to be ready for school rather than on the school to be ready for the children.

Generally, teachers in prior to school settings felt that their knowledge of the children and their expertise in early education was not recognised by teachers in schools. As one example, teachers in long day care described how they had spent all year making observations of the children to inform their planning, yet were not asked to share any of this information. They expressed amazement at teachers trying to observe children at orientation days in order to get to know them. One commented, "how can they find out anything in one day, especially when all the kids are new. They should just ask us".
Teachers in schools, on the other hand, reported that teachers in prior to school settings were not necessarily aware of what school was like and didn't necessarily realise that things couldn't be the same as in preschool or day care settings.

Successful transitions to school are of great importance to all the stakeholders concerned and seem to be measured using very similar criteria by the various groups. For parents/guardians, the major criteria expressed were disposition and knowledge. Hence, parents regarded transitions as successful if: "the child enjoys going to school"; "they drag themselves out of bed to get ready for school"; "their portfolio shows them improving"; "they

bring home awards and are doing well"; "are writing better homework" and "they are ready to read in Year 1".

Prior to school teachers were also concerned about disposition and, to a much lesser extent, knowledge. "You can tell that children have made successful transitions to school if they are happy, well-adjusted and like school. They need to have reached an acceptable performance standard and have shown no radical change of behaviour." School teachers felt that the success of a transition should be measured through "staff evaluations, parent comments and, even, child evaluations". For the teachers, a successful transition to school is clear if: "the child is happy, wants to come to school and doesn't want to pack up but keeps working"; "they are smiling, eager to come to school, following routines, lining up, sitting in the classroom looking to the teacher for direction"; and, in summary, "if the child speaks openly, has confidence with the teacher, knows their way around the school, interacts well with peers, they can toilet, look after their possessions, attend, become part of the school community without any fuss". Interestingly, teachers did not indicate knowledge as an important criterion in measuring the success of transitions.

The only child to specifically address the question of successful transitions suggested that you needed to consider whether the child was "playing with other little kids and making friends while others sat in a corner alone." One Year 1 child had some interesting suggestions about what teachers can do to make starting school easier for children. He suggested that:

> *teachers, to help kids behave, have a lolly jar and you can take a lolly, and give out stickers to people you think are being good. I think they [teachers] should make little offices and restaurants so they can decide what they want to do when you grow up, because I haven't decided.*

His friend added that teachers should "help by colouring in", while the third member of the group was adamant in her comment that "teachers should make it easier for kids who can't spell [and]give them a chance and give us easier work".

The children were clearly aware that school was different from preschool, and that the expectations of adults changed when they went to school. One child indicated that she had to go to school because she was "older, too big at preschool, so had to go. You get big and learn more ... learn much more at big school, learn to read. At preschool they read to you, at school you learn to read". In a similar vein, another Kindergarten child compared the size of the school with preschool, noting that school was "interesting, lots of places. It is big. So many people and enough room for all of them". Another child thought that school was fun, just like preschool, but there were differences, "it's a bit like preschool. You eat inside at preschool, and eat outside at school. Play outside at school and inside at preschool". One Kindergarten girl was aware of the differing social demands, stating that at school "you can't bring your favourite toy. If you bring your favourite toy, you're not scared. Can take your favourite toy to preschool".

Discussion

Just as there were differences in the criteria used to assess school readiness (Dockett et al, 1997), there were differences among groups of teachers, parents and children as to what was important in preparing children for school. Parents and teachers were unanimous in their agreement that it was mainly the responsibility of parents to help children prepare for school.

However, teachers in school and prior to school settings as well as parents indicated that each of these settings had an important role to play in preparing children for the transition to school.

Teachers and children emphasised the importance of talking with children and describing what school would be like and what would happen at school. While parents also regarded this as important, many indicated that they also thought it important for children to have some knowledge and skills related to learning and succeeding in school before they started. As with the concept of school readiness, there seem to be quite different emphases in what is regarded as important in helping children become ready for school. One of the consequences to flow from this is that teachers in prior to school settings and schools, and parents may well be working towards the same end (a successful transition to school) but in quite different, possibly even conflicting, ways. Some of the differences could relate to the distinction made earlier between readiness to learn and readiness for school.

Children were clear in their understanding that school and preschool were different and that there were different expectations. They were articulate in describing both their feelings about starting school and what was important for them when starting school.

While children seem clear on the distinctions between preschool and school, adults seem to understand this least of all. Teachers in prior to school and school settings seem unaware of the skills and expertise of their colleagues in different settings and while there is an acceptance of the importance of talking and working together, this seems to happen only rarely.

Teachers and parents have mentioned the importance of working together– forming a partnership–yet there are many obstacles to this process. Transition programs, orientation days and informal gatherings are all ways in which teachers in schools and parents and their children can become more familiar with each other. However, demands on working parents, other children and family responsibilities as well as the expectations of each group can work against the development of such a partnership. For many parents, the sense of authority exuded by those in schools can be alienating, even when teachers say that they encourage parents to wander around the school and to drop in.

Future directions

As mentioned previously, the pilot project reported in this paper is regarded as the beginning of an extensive research agenda investigating issues related to starting school. One of the aims of the pilot project was to collect data from the key stakeholders in order to inform the development of a questionnaire which will be distributed, initially, through NSW. Focus group interviews are planned as follow-up to the questionnaire, as a means of enriching the data collected from parents and teachers and in order to collect data from children who are at school as well as those who have not yet started school. We are confident that the inclusion of children's voices and the use of grounded theory, rather than pre-determined lists of readiness attributes, will contribute significantly to the large body of literature and the development of practice in relation to successful transitions to school.

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